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Recommendations on institutional arrangements for disaster reduction activities of the United Nations system after the conclusion of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report is submitted in pursuance of General Assembly resolution 53/185. Together with the report of the Secretary-General on the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR) (A/54/132–E/1999/80 and Add.1) requested by the General Assembly in its resolution 44/236, the present report is intended to contribute to the Council's deliberations on the future arrangements for natural disaster reduction within the United Nations system. It is composed of three sections: the IDNDR mandate (sect. I); achievements of the Decade (sect. II); and recommendations for the future (sect. III). A list of regional and thematic IDNDR meetings held between June 1998 and June 1999 is contained in the annex. The report puts forward a proposal for the continuation of a non-operational focal function for policy development, advocacy and inter-agency coordination of disaster reduction activities in the United Nations system after the closure of the Decade.

* A/54/50.
** E/1999/100 and Add.1.

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I. IDNDR mandate

1. The mandate assigned to the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR) was derived from the objective and goals formulated in the International Framework of Action, as adopted by the General Assembly in its resolution 44/236. The strategic focus at the start of the Decade was on disaster reduction through the scientific understanding of natural disasters, the assessment of their damage potential, and the mitigation and reduction of damage through technical assistance and technology transfer, education and training.

2. A mid-term review of IDNDR was undertaken by the Economic and Social Council at its substantive session of 1994; its results were endorsed by the General Assembly in its resolution 49/22 A. Based on the findings of the World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction and guided by the Yokohama Strategy and Plan of Action (see A/CONF.172/9, chap. I, annex I), the mid-term review introduced new strategies for the second half of the Decade.

3. Consequently, IDNDR placed greater emphasis on social sciences and economics; focused on the development of public policy, including legislation and national policies for disaster reduction; intensified regional and subregional approaches, and shifted from emergency preparedness to the reduction of vulnerability and risk. Overall, more effort was put into the promotion of concrete applications of science and technology for disaster reduction. More attention was also paid to the users' community that is so crucial in the interface between disaster planning and concrete measures of implementation.

4. Considering the evolution in the nature, frequency, intensity and complexity of disasters worldwide (see sect. II below), the mandate of the United Nations system in dealing with disaster reduction is bound to evolve further. In order to preserve the United Nations system's ability to support the disaster reduction effort in Member States well beyond the year 2000, the momentum generated by the Decade should be maintained.

II. Achievements of the Decade

5. The achievements of the Decade are described in detail in the report of the Secretary-General on the Decade (A/54/132–E/1990/80 and Add.1). The present review of major lessons and observations on the evolution of disaster hazards worldwide is provided in support of proposals for future functional and institutional arrangements after the conclusion of IDNDR.

6. During the Decade, strong upward trends occurred in the severity and frequency of natural disasters worldwide, with increasing impacts on constructed environments and populations. In the past two years in particular, a sequence of large-scale natural disasters has reminded communities around the world of the threat posed by natural hazards. Most of these disasters have been statistically termed "one in 100 years events" and referred to as "disasters of the century" in the countries and regions affected (see box).

Some recent disaster highlights

In 1997/98, extensive El Niño-related drought and subsequent wildfires have caused massive social and economic disruption in Indonesia. At the same time, countries in Africa have suffered severely from both floods and drought. An earthquake in northern Afghanistan has caused large-scale loss of life and destruction of property. Bangladesh and China have, again, experienced floods of extreme proportions. Hurricanes Georges and Mitch have devastated vulnerable communities across Central America and the Caribbean. Extensive flooding and mudslides have also significantly affected the economies and human health situation of Pacific coast countries in South America. The economy of Papua New Guinea has nearly been brought to a standstill by the culmination of impacts of drought, frost and tsunamis. Europe has suffered one of its most severe floods in the Oder river basin, while tornadoes ravaged towns in North America, causing more fatalities and injuries than any other event in the preceding two decades. In February 1999, massive avalanches precipitated by unusually heavy snowfall in the Alpine region resulted in many fatalities and extensive structural damage.

7. According to the Munich Reinsurance company, economic losses from such major natural disasters have risen by a factor of nine since 1960. The last year, 1998, has been particularly severe in comparison, with overall losses from some 700 natural disasters estimated at US$ 93 billion. This gradual increase in the losses is attributed to a variety of factors, often acting in conjunction, such as:

(a) The continuing concentration of population and assets in high-risk areas, with insufficient efforts towards risk and vulnerability reduction;

(b) The global neglect of disaster reduction strategies in socio-economic planning, risk assessment and monitoring, early warning and disaster preparedness;

(c) The increasing vulnerability of modern industrialized societies to disasters, *inter alia*, due to reliance on complex infrastructure systems;

(d) The degradation of the natural environment, leading to negative synergies between the occurrence of natural phenomena and increased risks for communities exposed to natural hazards;

(e) Increasingly convincing evidence of global climate change, including a possible aggravation of climate variability, such as the El Niño/La Niña phenomenon;

(f) Increased occurrence of so-called "compound" disasters (natural-technological, natural-environmental);

(g) The effects of large-scale poverty in the developing world and a potential for economic collapse in countries in economic transition, which would increase community vulnerability to natural disasters.

8. Despite these negative trends, there have been several developments in the opposite direction at the global level, which have helped to support the Decade's goals and objectives, *inter alia*:

(a) An increasing realization in many professional fields of the need for a broader orientation on intersectoral approaches, such as in climatology, which considers disaster reduction in relation to environmental change, water resources management, coastal zone management and sea level rise;

(b) A growing understanding of the human dimension in the occurrence of natural disasters, and of the relationships between socio-economic factors, risk factors and disaster vulnerability;

(c) Dramatic improvements in the development of compact and powerful telecommunications and computer systems, which has improved access to information and real-time data on natural hazards in most parts of the world;

(d) Investment in earth observations technology and the establishment of global monitoring systems for oceans, land areas and climate (Global Ocean, Terrestrial and Climate Observing Systems);

(e) An increased interest in the study of global environmental change, in particular climate change and climate variability, and dramatic improvements in the scientific understanding of the global climate regime, the forecasting of climate variability and extremes, and the projection of their impacts on society.

9. Consequently, the Decade's objectives have gained increasing recognition at the national level, as witnessed by the steadily growing numbers (currently 141) of Member States with national IDNDR committees or focal points, and the gradual policy shift from response and recovery to reduction and preparedness in the national disaster plans of most of these countries. Regional IDNDR conferences, which brought Governments together with key disaster management organizations in each of the five regions of the world as part of the final IDNDR action plan for 1998/99, have demonstrated the potential for exchange and sharing of experience and approaches between countries at the regional level. Reinforced by IDNDR applications, such as the Risk Assessment Tools for Diagnosis of Urban Areas against Seismic Disasters initiative, the IDNDR focus on early warning as a key disaster reduction tool and IDNDR's promotion campaigns, such as the annual International Disaster Reduction Day established by the General Assembly in its resolution 44/236, paragraph 2, such geographic common approaches have contributed to an almost system-wide reaffirmation of the immense value of disaster reduction as an integral part of sustainable development strategies.

10. The IDNDR Inter-Agency Steering Committee has served as a common platform for the development of disaster reduction activities among IDNDR partner agencies inside and outside the United Nations. Several of these, such as the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization /Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (UNESCO/IOC), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the World Bank and the International Council of Scientific Unions (ICSU), have defined a new disaster orientation in their programmes. Others, such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the World Health Organization (WHO), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) and the Council of Europe, have intensified disaster reduction efforts that had already been in place prior to the Decade. And others have intensified collaboration on disaster reduction as a specific contribution to the Decade, as is the case with joint ventures between WMO and UNESCO, between the World Health Organization (WHO), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Federation of Red

Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), and others. The IDNDR Scientific and Technical Committee has contributed significantly policy development; its final report is contained in document A/54/132–E/1990/80/Add.1.

11. In 1997/98, the rapid creation of the Inter-Agency Task Force on El Niño within the framework of IDNDR provided a specific example of intersectoral cooperation among diverse international agencies. Through the IDNDR action plan 1998–1999, with its specific objectives and targeted activities, the IDNDR secretariat has facilitated concerted action in the fields of policy development, advocacy and inter-agency coordination in support of a comprehensive disaster reduction strategy for the twenty-first century. The regional and thematic IDNDR meetings, organized within this action plan (see annex) have demonstrated the potential for exchange and sharing of experience between countries at the regional and international levels. With the increase in frequency and severity of natural and technological hazards, the merits of such common platforms have become more manifest in recent years.

III. Recommendations for the future

12. A final assessment of the Decade must take into account the possible evolution of disaster reduction in the twenty-first century. On the one hand, changes in the need for disaster reduction will be determined by the changing patterns of natural hazards, their future potential for association with technological disasters or political conflicts, and shifts in the socio-economic and demographic trends. On the other hand, new technological tools and their wider availability will potentially alter the nature of disaster reduction. Based on the lessons learned during the past 10 years and current trends in society, politics and the sciences, future disasters will be characterized by the following factors, all potentially acting in conjunction:

(a) As population pressure mounts in specific areas of the world, more people may live in or depend on disaster-vulnerable ecosystems;

(b) Where sustained economic growth does not keep pace with population growth, large-scale poverty may increase and, hence, vulnerability to disasters;

(c) As global environmental change continues, new natural hazards may develop and new combinations of existing hazards may have unprecedented consequences;

(d) Increasing vulnerability of growing populations in high-risk areas may trigger large-scale population movements.

13. However, at the same time it may be expected that:

(a) The ever-increasing ability of monitoring, modelling and forecasting the behaviour of climate regimes and global environmental change may lead to considerably improved early warning systems for a larger range of natural disasters;

(b) More powerful telecommunication tools, combined with smaller but more powerful electronic computing and positioning systems, will improve the efficiency of response and relief operations during and following disasters and allow for better coordination of disaster management.

14. Disasters occur when natural, technical and human-induced phenomena impact on vulnerable socio-economic systems. Vulnerability to disasters is a function of objective hazards and human activity in a constructed environment. Human behaviour patterns can be influenced; therefore, vulnerability can be reduced. This makes disaster reduction not a random choice but a moral imperative. If communities need not suffer, they should not suffer. In addition, there are important socio-economic benefits of disaster reduction. Insufficient investment in disaster reduction leads to much higher costs for humanitarian assistance and reconstruction following natural disasters, and to a widening development gap between rich and poor communities. The cost-effectiveness of disaster reduction thus makes it a strategic imperative as well.

15. Disaster reduction provides a strategic opportunity for humanitarian assistance to formulate concerted approaches which include measures of prevention, preparedness and response, as well as rehabilitation and reconstruction leading to a higher level of community disaster resilience. Disaster reduction thus offers a real opportunity to effectively link the humanitarian and sustainable development constituencies in their efforts to achieve social and economic stability.

16. The lessons learned during the Decade demonstrate that disaster reduction must go beyond sectoral mainstreaming. It needs to be recognized in a large number of sectoral strategies, including those in development planning and technical cooperation, disaster management and humanitarian assistance, the protection of natural resources, the management of population growth and the mitigation of climate change. Disaster reduction must thus be applied at a multitude of levels by a great variety of actors, in both public and private-sector domains.

17. Important actors in this respect are public officials in Member States, who are able to improve disaster reduction policy-making. The second Asia-Europe Foreign Ministers'

Meeting, held at Berlin on 29 March 1999, unanimously endorsed the IDNDR approach to disaster reduction within the framework of advancing international cooperation between the European Union and 10 Asian States. It stressed the importance of improved international cooperation, including early warning, to reduce the impact of the El Niño phenomenon. As another example, the African determination to ensure the integration of disaster reduction in Government policies culminated in the Nairobi Declaration on Natural Disaster Reduction, adopted at the conclusion of the IDNDR-UNEP meeting for Africa (18–21 May 1999), which asserts that it is important to ensure continuity of disaster reduction in Africa after the conclusion of IDNDR in 1999, so that the positive results achieved during the Decade are not lost, and that the United Nations system should ensure the continuation of the functions of advocacy and coordination at the international level performed so far by the IDNDR secretariat. Similar statements can be found in the concluding observations formulated by the STC in its Final Report.

18. The overall evaluation of IDNDR demonstrates that disaster reduction is not a static concept with fixed methods of work but is subject to evolution in accordance with changing challenges and ever-increasing technical opportunities. In order to ensure that the Decade's achievements will not be lost, the momentum of this continuous review, assessment and reform of disaster reduction philosophy, its application and its policies must be maintained. As confirmed by the Decade, the United Nations system provides an eminently suited framework for bringing the various interests together in the mutual interest of all. It is thus crucially important that a platform is maintained for cooperation through coordination, and for the promotion of synergies rather than compartmentalization among stakeholders.

19. In this connection, the IDNDR secretariat produced a proposal for future arrangements for natural disaster prevention activities following the closure of the Decade as a position paper for discussion in the Inter-Agency Steering Committee meeting of 25 January 1999. The note, subsequently presented to the Organizational Committee (OC)/ACC in March 1999, proposed the establishment, on 1 January 2000, of an inter-agency secretariat for natural disaster reduction, composed of an international team of experts, *inter alia*, seconded by United Nations organizations, Governments, and non-governmental organizations, funded by voluntary contributions from Member States and other sources. The note also recognized the need for an inter-agency task force for natural disaster reduction, which would be composed of representatives from within and from outside the United Nations system.

20. The task force would provide a platform for the realization of disaster reduction in a concerted manner, particularly through dialogue and consensus-building among sectoral entities both within and outside the United Nations system. Its major functions would be:

(a) To serve as the main forum within the United Nations system for devising strategies and policies for the reduction of natural hazards;

(b) To identify gaps in disaster reduction policies and programmes and recommend remedial action;

(c) To ensure complementarity of action by agencies involved in disaster reduction;

(d) To provide policy guidance to the secretariat;

(e) To convene ad hoc meetings of experts on disaster reduction-related issues.

The task force would work in full accordance with existing institutional arrangements in the United Nations system which may relate to natural disaster reduction concerns.

21. The proposed secretariat would serve as a substantive secretariat for the task force. Its mandate would consist of advocacy, policy development and coordination of the United Nations system's activities in the field of natural disaster reduction. Its main functions would be:

(a) To serve as the focal point within the United Nations system for the coordination of strategies and programmes for natural disaster reduction, and to ensure synergy between disaster reduction strategies and those in the socio-economic and humanitarian fields;

(b) To support the Inter-Agency Task Force in the development of policies on natural disaster reduction;

(c) To promote a worldwide culture of reduction of the negative effects of natural hazards, through advocacy campaigns;

(d) To serve as an international clearing house for the dissemination and exchange of information and knowledge on disaster reduction strategies;

(e) To backstop the policy and advocacy activities of national committees for natural disaster reduction.

22. OC/ACC took note of the information paper, and in order to assist the Secretary-General in formulating his recommendations for presentation to the General Assembly through the Council, OC/ACC:

(a) Expressed appreciation for the contribution that the United Nations system, especially the IDNDR secretariat, had made in advancing advocacy and enhancing awareness in the area of natural disaster, preparedness, and mitigation and relief;

(b) Agreed on the need for the continued enhancement of collaboration among the members of the United Nations system and to further strengthen their capacities in this regard;

(c) Emphasized the importance of mainstreaming these activities as an integral part of sustainable development and national strategies;

(d) Welcomed inter-agency, multisectoral and interdisciplinary approaches to natural disaster reduction, including preparedness, prevention and mitigation;

(e) Noted the importance of ensuring synergies between actors within the United Nations system and those outside it in the context of disaster awareness, prevention, and preparedness as well as response;

(f) Noted also the growing awareness among different organizations of the link between disaster and development and the initiatives taken by them, including those by the World Bank, to strengthen their capacity to participate in natural disaster preparedness, prevention and mitigation activities, as well as the responsibility given to UNDP by the General Assembly for operational disaster prevention, mitigation and preparedness;

(g) Emphasized the non-operational character and universality of the advocacy dimension of the objectives of IDNDR;

(h) Took note of the information provided by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) on how to sign/ratify the Tampere Convention which provides a legal framework for the use of telecommunications in international humanitarian assistance;

(i) Noted that the considerable recent advances in seasonal weather and climate predictions, including of such phenomena as El Niño, enable improved preparedness of vulnerable communities against natural disasters. This highlighted the importance of a visible focal point within the United Nations system for scientific and technical aspects of natural disaster preparedness, prevention and mitigation.

23. OC/ACC noted the different options for the institutional arrangements for such an inter-agency secretariat, and also noted that in the light of these considerations, the secretariat would make these options the subject of consultation with agencies most directly concerned prior to submission to the General Assembly through the Council. In this context, OC/ACC emphasized the importance of an inter-agency approach in the follow-up and cautioned against the proliferation of secretarial functions. Subsequently, the IDNDR secretariat has held a series of consultations on the subject with several of the agencies and other relevant institutions closely associated with the work of the Decade.

24. After careful review of the achievements of the Decade and future challenges in the field of natural disaster reduction, and having carefully considered the views expressed in the course of consultations, the Secretary-General believes that future arrangements must (a) provide optimal conditions for the non-operational inter-agency nature of natural disaster advocacy; (b) facilitate the continuing dialogue with both the humanitarian assistance and sustainable development constituencies, and foster synergies and complementarity between the two; and (c) afford high visibility for the goals of disaster reduction within the framework of the United Nations. The Secretary-General believes that these conditions are best realized by establishing an inter-agency task force on natural disaster reduction, as proposed in paragraphs 18–20 above, and by placing the proposed inter-agency secretariat as a distinct entity integrated within the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, under the responsibility of the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs. The inter-agency secretariat would be financed from extrabudgetary resources, through a trust fund.

Annex

List of regional and thematic IDNDR evaluation meetings, June 1998–June 1999

Regional meetings

Central Europe (Prague, June 1998)

Europe (London, June 1998)

Seventh annual South Pacific regional disaster meeting (Nuku'alofa, Tonga, July 1998)

Regional conference for CIS and Central Eastern European countries (Yerevan, September 1998)

IDNDR-ESCAP regional meeting for Asia (Bangkok, February 1999)

Prevention and reduction of natural disasters in the Mediterranean (Valencia, May 1999)

IDNDR-UNEP regional meeting for Africa (Nairobi, May 1999)

Hemispheric conference for Latin America and the Caribbean (San José, May–June 1999)

Thematic meetings

Intergovernmental meeting on emergency telecommunications (Tampere, Finland, June 1998)

International conference on early warning (Potsdam, Germany, September 1998)

International seminar on natural disaster reduction for roads in the Mediterranean countries (Istanbul, October 1998)

First intergovernmental seminar of experts on El Niño (Guayaquil, Ecuador, November 1998)

Conference on mountain natural hazards (Grenoble, France, April 1999)

Natural disaster prevention: land-use planning and sustainable development (Paris, June 1999)